

CITY OF BELLEVUE
EASTGATE/I-90
CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

December 2, 2010
5:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Room 1E-108

MEMBERS PRESENT: Carrie Courter Blanton, Tom Bohman, Dave Elliott, Jay Hamlin, Jeffrey Hummer, Francois Larrivee, Mark Ludtka, Jim Stanton, Tom Perea, Rob Pucher, Rachel Solemsaas, John Stokes, Cynthia Welti

MEMBERS ABSENT: Lindy Bruce, David Vranizan

OTHERS PRESENT: Jennifer Robertson

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. Call to Order

Commissioner Larrivee called the meeting to order at 5:36 p.m.

2. Introduction of Council Liaison Jennifer Robertson

Mr. Larrivee introduced Councilmember Robertson and noted that she had been tapped by the Council to serve as liaison to the committee. Councilmember Robertson said her intention is to attend as many of the committee meetings as possible in the coming year. She thanked the committee members for volunteering their time to serve on a very important committee. She said she would be reporting to the Council periodically concerning the progress of the committee and looks forward to working with them.

3. CAC Endorsement of Operating Guidelines

There was consensus to abide by the operating guidelines.

4. Review of Background Reports and Public Outreach

Senior Planner Mike Bergstrom said a preliminary screening analysis for transportation purposes was conducted about a year ago. It looked at different scenarios and addressed a couple of issues, including what additional uses and at what magnitude they may be feasible from a transportation standpoint. The existing conditions were reviewed and compared to the projected growth figures through 2020, and then consideration was given to what would happen if additional square footage were added.

Mr. Bergstrom said a market study was also done for the Eastgate/I-90 area. The consultant was asked to look at four basic questions: what is the potential for more employment uses and how they would compete with the other employment centers in the city and regionally; how can retail uses be retained and strengthened and continue to serve not only the corridor but the surrounding neighborhoods; how much more residential can be developed in the corridor; and what is the potential for transit-oriented development, particularly in conjunction with the park and ride lot.

A number of outreach steps have been taken to date. One was an online questionnaire with fairly broad questions. An economic development forum was conducted that focused on four specific questions: what opportunities for development are appropriate; what should be done about the aesthetic quality of the area; how can neighborhood-oriented businesses be retained; and what are the transportation priorities.

The outreach efforts have included attending various events; corporate involvement through one-on-one interviews and group presentations; open houses; presentations to homeowners associations; and the distribution of flyers.

Mr. Bergstrom briefly reviewed the study area boundaries with the committee members. He noted that the specific focus will be on the primary study area, but the relationship of the corridor to the surrounding areas will not be overlooked, many of which lie in different planning subareas.

The corridor is currently home to a variety of uses from industrial to office, retail and Bellevue College. The physical characteristics of the corridor offer both advantages and challenges that will need to be dealt with. The western portion of the corridor has lower elevations and is where much of the area drains, yielding streams and wetlands. Just outside of the northeastern portion of the study area is Phantom Lake; a part of the study area runoff flows to Phantom Lake. The corridor is home to a number of corporations, a variety of other types of businesses, churches, temples, the largest park and ride in King County, and is near Factoria Mall, though the mall is not in the study area.

Most of the study area developed post-1960s, with most of the development occurring between the 1980s and 2000. Development within the area has slowed, in part because of the economy but also because the area is largely built out. Given the relatively young age of the buildings in the corridor, it can be assumed that they have a great deal of structural and economic life left in them, so they will not be going away any time soon.

The most-cited attribute highlighted in the online survey results was access to the freeways. At the same time, traffic was mentioned most as one of the things that is not so good about the corridor. Shopping choices were mentioned both as something good and something bad about the corridor.

Mr. Bergstrom said the principle related to economic development speaks to enhancing the economic vitality of the corridor without degrading mobility elsewhere, and assuring that the area will continue to contribute to the diversity of the city's economic mix. The questions that go along with the principle include what land use changes might be appropriate; how to retain and attract businesses; what infrastructure improvements are needed; and how the corridor can remain compatible with the surrounding land uses.

At the economic forum, it was noted that access to certain services is important to office tenants and employees. Additionally, zoning as a barrier to change was highlighted, as was the need for mixed use allowances, and the potential to increase the non-SOV modesplit with the right type of development. Responses to the online questionnaire regarding economic development included an observation that the area is ideally located to become the next hub of commerce; the area should be rezoned to allow for higher density business uses which will provide more jobs; more office and hotels are not needed; and more development that will only bring more cars to the area is not needed.

Mr. Bergstrom said the existing zoning has set the pattern of development for the

corridor. Much of the area is zoned Office/Limited Business (OLB), which allows for office and very limited business uses. The development pattern primarily is office campuses surrounded by parking. There is some Light Industrial in the western portion of the study area, and there are a few commercial zones scattered around.

Answering a question asked by Mr. Hamlin, Mr. Bergstrom said the zoning has been in place for a long time and when it was established the intent was to allow the area to serve as a secondary market for office growth. The primary focus for office was then and always has been the downtown, thus outside of the downtown the uses are permitted less height and smaller floor area ratios.

Mr. Ludtka asked what the potential maximum buildout of the 633-acre study area is under the current zoning. Mr. Bergstrom said staff has looked at some elements but has not made an overall determination with regard to the maximum buildout.

Mr. Perea said he would be curious to know if rezoning would cause the owners of existing buildings to consider tearing them down and putting something else up in their place. Mr. Bergstrom said that would depend on a lot of factors, only one of which is the zoning. The newer a building is, the higher the economic lift required to make redevelopment financially feasible. The general understanding is that for buildings constructed in the last 20 years, a tripling of the allowable density would be needed to trigger an interest in redevelopment.

Mr. Bergstrom allowed that market trends are cyclical and absorption and vacancy rates fluctuate over time. The current economic downturn has resulted in a higher vacancy rate; even so, during the last year more than half a million square feet of office space was reoccupied.

The market report looked at the development patterns in the study area and a square footage breakdown of the different types of uses. The strengths highlighted by the study include the fact that the area is a primary business center for the region; is in proximity to the freeway; has convenient access to services, education and recreational amenities; there is market demand for growth in the corridor; and there is potential for a variety of growth types. The report highlighted specific areas of the corridor that would be appropriate for future growth based on a number of factors; those growth opportunities did not take into account whether or not the current zoning would allow for the uses. The highlighted areas were along Eastgate Way, near the park and ride, east of the park and ride on 143rd Avenue SE, along 156th Avenue SE near the Boeing site, and south of I-90 where there is a dated RV park. The report highlighted research and development potential in Richards Valley where the uses in the buildings are aging and the market is changing. Residential is highlighted in the report for the slopes along 139th Avenue SE, near Bellevue College, on and around the Michaels Toyota site, and possibly on the Eastgate Plaza site were it to redevelop with a mixed use concept.

Mr. Larrivee suggested the word “opportunity” as used in the report should be interpreted to mean “suggestion” given the factors that might be in the way.

Mr. Bergstrom agreed. Continuing, he said the report highlighted the Richards Valley as appropriate for some retail uses, especially along SE 36th Street. Retail was also highlighted for the area near the entrance to Bellevue College on 148th Avenue SE; on the Michaels Toyota and Eastgate Plaza sites; and possibly along 156th Avenue SE where there are some small freestanding businesses and services.

The market report concluded that over the next 20 years the study area could expect demand for up to a million and a half square feet of office; possibly 200 hotel rooms; and 1800 residential units. The report also highlighted the importance of Factoria Mall to the corridor; the limited opportunities for grocery stores; the fact that Richards Valley could be used to house incubator companies; and the potential for residential and some retail uses associated with Bellevue College. The report states that in order to stay competitive with other employment centers, it will be necessary to add more services and amenities to the study area.

The list of challenges includes competition from other areas; embedded investment in the existing buildings; environmental constraints; limited road capacity and connectivity; and the large institutional holdings. Tools that could be used to address the challenges include flexible zoning that allows more mixed uses; local improvement districts; business improvement districts; density bonuses or transfers; and the use of public anchors in the form of subsidized infrastructure.

Neighborhood services are used by both the employment community as well as surrounding residents. The companion principle has to do with retaining and enhancing those services. The survey respondents commented that grocery and shopping centers in the study area are old and in need of remodeling; that the services most often looked for include shopping, dining, dry cleaning and recreation; that people want a shopping experience with dynamic and active lifestyle centers; and that walkability is important. Several mentioned a desire for more village-type shopping centers; the need to connect retail to the neighborhoods; and the need for strong transit support. The upshot is that people are looking for a sense of place.

The market report concluded that north of I-90 there is a need for places in which people can shop, eat and gather; that there is retail potential to the east of Michaels Toyota and at the entrance to Bellevue College if anchored by something else; that Bellevue is over-served by supermarkets generally in terms of square feet per population; that mixed use and transit-oriented development models could reinforce the economic performance of Eastgate Plaza over time; and that the best opportunities for retail are at Factoria Mall. The report also concluded that big box retail in Richards Valley could generate tax revenues for the city, but noted that such uses tend not to create much synergy with other uses.

Mr. Bergstrom said the work going forward will include an evaluation of the office development location opportunities in the study area, how realistic they are, and what it would take to make them work. The work will also seek to engage employers on ideas for keeping the corridor competitive and vibrant; include a review of the city's development codes and regulations to identify possible barriers to growth; identify geographic areas for more detailed study; consider examples of transitioning uses; evaluate the relationship of the study area to the surrounding residential areas; inform all land use scenarios with environmental considerations; and perform economic testing of the land use alternatives that emerge from the process.

Mr. Elliott commented that from an office market perspective, there are several things to consider in thinking about redevelopment. The corridor is very popular for office uses. It has good access to and from the freeway which puts the area only 20 minutes to downtown Seattle, ten minutes to Issaquah, and five minutes to I-405. The attribute of being able to park a car at the office is very good, which is a plus for people who are on the move as part of their job. The existing buildings have a great deal of useful life left in them. Redevelopment is time consuming and results in a loss of income for several

years. Rehabilitation, however, can be accomplished much quicker and can draw in new tenants. The downtown core is supposed to be the office center for the city, but it is very difficult to access, and cars must be parked in expensive garages. The Eastgate/I-90 office market is very good.

Mr. Hamlin commented that the area along 143rd Avenue SE is intriguing. He suggested that it would be a good place for village retail and potential residential given its proximity to both transit and Bellevue College.

Mr. Bohman commented that most of the buildings located along the I-90 corridor have surface parking lots. If those lots were to be replaced with structured parking, allowing the current lots to be redeveloped, would only make sense if the density were increased. That, of course, would trigger impacts such as increased traffic and decreased freeway accessibility. There is a lot of potential given higher densities.

Ms. Welti asked what the work of the committee is intended to accomplish. Mr. Bergstrom said the end result will be a report to the City Council in the form of a recommendation for how the area should look in 20 years. Part of the effort will involve considering what code restructuring would need to be done to bring about the vision for the area.

Senior Planner Franz Loewenherz added that the committee's recommendations with respect to transportation infrastructure will play into the city's Transportation Facilities Plan and the Capital Investment Program.

Mr. Ludtka commented that converting low-density uses to higher-density uses, and allowing for a greater mix of uses, will help to create a scenario in which people do not have to get in their cars and drive from place to place, thus clogging up the roads.

Answering a question asked by Ms. Solemsaas, Mr. Bergstrom said the market study was not specific as to the types of research and development uses that might be appropriate in the study area. Mr. Ludtka commented that research and development uses around the University of Washington campus have become one of the driving forces for job creation in the region. The same uses could be benefitting Bellevue College. It is a tremendous opportunity.

Mr. Larrivee stressed the need to define exactly what is meant by research and development as a use.

Ms. Courter Blanton asked if there is market data available to support more sophisticated higher end retail uses in the area. She commented that the University Village works because it has residential uses to continue supporting it after hours when all the office workers have gone home, and she asked if the data shows that the daytime office workers would be sufficient to support new retail uses. Mr. Bergstrom said the market study did not come out heavy with regard to retail uses, though it did identify a few areas in which it might be appropriate. The current demographics certainly would support some types of retail uses.

Mr. Loewenherz said the staff do not want to see the committee work result in a grandiose plan that will never be implemented because it has no base in market reality. He said as the study moves forward it will be necessary to touch base with the market and the developers.

Mr. Loewenherz explained that the term “multimodal” is inclusive of all types of travel from single-occupant vehicle to buses, bicycles and pedestrians. One of the city’s overriding principles is that transportation planning must be multimodal in scope. The survey results and the economic forum highlighted the park and ride as a great asset for the corridor. It has over 1600 stalls and enjoys a utilization rate of more than 80 percent. It is the largest park and ride lot in King County and has more than 500 trips in and out of it daily. Unfortunately, local bus connections to the facility are not ideal; getting to regional destinations from the park and ride is often easier than getting to Bellevue destinations. A project is under way that is focused on improving local service.

The traditional approach is simply to build more roads. Bellevue’s commitment, however, is to consider all modes of travel in an attempt to ensure that people have choices and options for getting around.

Another overarching principle of the Comprehensive Plan is a commitment to the notion of context sensitive solutions. Simply put, the principle is that when projects are developed they must be considered in the broader context. They are viewed in relation to how they fit with the surrounding environment, how they build a sense of community and place, and ensuring that it will be as safe as possible.

The preliminary screening analysis can be characterized as a stress test of the transportation system in the Eastgate/I-90 corridor. The analysis did not look at specific parcels but rather focused on the larger transportation zones comprising clusters of land uses. The traffic modeling undertaken allowed for adding various land uses to determine what the trip generation and resulting impacts would be. During the study there will be discussions about the levels of service on the roadways and conditions on the approaches. The preliminary screening analysis started with the 2008 baseline conditions and projected out a land use picture through 2030 that was much more robust than that contained in the Spinnaker report. The baseline includes projects in the adopted 12-year Transportation Facilities Plan, but did not take into account planned improvements to I-90 which have not yet been adopted by the state. Going forward, those improvements will be factored in and they likely will prove to be beneficial.

The modeling work done to date confirms that out to 2030 the system will not collapse. The places that are currently problematic will continue to be problematic in the future with similar levels of service. The solutions to be explored will go beyond merely adding travel lanes and will include operational improvements, channelization improvements, and a broad universe of concepts. A variety of pedestrian and bicycle improvements will be explored as well.

Mr. Loewenherz said there are dead-end streets in the corridor. He said one of the Council’s priorities is to address not only streets that end but also bicycle facilities and sidewalks that end leaving the users frustrated. The survey work highlighted a lot of frustration about north-south and east-west connectivity related to various modes of travel. To some degree, connectivity is challenged by the geography of the area.

In planning for new facilities it is an easy thing to just draw lines on a map, but aligning with reality is more challenging. Part of the study will include a focus on new roads and facilities and what is needed to improve connectivity.

The scope of work provided by the Council includes a directive to get out ahead of the Sound Transit phase III work. The work will not include specific alignments but will include strategic locations for stations, and modeling to determine the level of

connectivity they would have.

5. Discussion of Issues and Opportunities

Mr. Ludtka agreed the committee should consider possible transit station locations in the study area. He said having transit serve the area will open the door to a number of new possibilities, with more density and growth around the stations. Transit will bring with it additional services and will help to eliminate trips within the corridor on a daily basis. Mr. Loewenherz said there has been a lot of research done on the level of density needed to make transit function well.

Mr. Elliott suggested downtown Renton is a good example of a transit-oriented development that works. The city acted to convince the car dealers to move out along the freeway to get them out of the downtown, and they then turned the area into what it is. There are condominiums, a bus transit center, ground floor retail and other uses in a very successful mix. The Kent development also works very well.

It was agreed the committee would benefit from receiving a briefing about the elements of the Renton and Kent developments and the lessons learned at a future meeting.

Mr. Hummer asked if there will be a sound study on I-90. Assuming an increased density that includes housing, any outdoor living spaces may not be usable because of the noise from the freeway. Mr. Loewenherz said good urban design and interstate planting will help, but will not buffer all of the freeway decibels. The state does do noise studies as part of its projects, and where the threshold determination is met, noise walls are often constructed. There are, however, other factors to consider, including visibility for commercial properties.

Mr. Bergstrom said a wide range of perspectives have been received to date with regard to whether or not housing would work in the Eastgate/I-90 corridor. Some have said the market is ripe and if the zoning were in place construction would be under way, but the market consultant was less than optimistic and questioned who would want to live next to a freeway.

Mr. Loewenherz said one of the Council's guiding principles was improving the corridor's urban design and coherence, recognizing it as a major city gateway and its prominent location on the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway. He said a lot of input had been received on the topic of urban design, with the comments running from general building aesthetics or the lack thereof to the arterial corridors along the roadways, the trail component of the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway, and the notion of greening the corridor generally.

The urban design section of the Comprehensive Plan is clear in calling for completion of the missing link in the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway. The Greenway runs from Thorpe in Eastern Washington all the way to the Seattle waterfront. The largest remaining gap is the 1.9-mile segment in Eastgate. The Greenway has a trail component, and throughout the corridor the trail takes a number of forms. Consideration has been given to what the trail in Bellevue should look and feel like in the ped-bike plan. Illustrative images were shared with the committee.

The urban design issue also relates to streets as centerpieces. Mr. Loewenherz said there is a lot of policy guidance in the urban design section of the Comprehensive Plan that speaks to the travel corridors that pass through the project area, including Factoria

Boulevard, Richards Road, and 150th Avenue SE. In each case the focus is on design treatments that will make them serve as gateways and green community assets.

Mr. Loewenherz pointed out that the Eastgate subarea plan contains a lot of policy guidance relative to the I-90 interchange locations and the frontage roads running along the freeway. The policies include a call for improvements involving landscaping treatments evoking the northwest greenway concept. The Washington State Department of Transportation roadside manual highlights a variety of benefits that can be realized from vegetation functions, including noise abatement, air pollution mitigation, water quality improvements, and others that are both environmental and aesthetic.

Ms. Solemsaas voiced her support for improving the ped-bike trails in the corridor and improving their visibility.

Mr. Larrivee commented that in several of the portrayals of the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway trail it appears the facility will stand alone rather than be largely integrated with the urban environment. Ms. Welti said there is no adopted philosophy that dictates one approach over the other. She agreed, however, that it is intended to serve in part those who would be traveling through the area.

Mr. Loewenherz said there is a remarkable example in Indianapolis where there is an off-street path that loops through the city. Millions of dollars from private donations were secured to make it happen, primarily from businesses who see the facility as a way to attract and retain their knowledge-based employees.

6. Public Comment – None

7. Adjourn

Mr. Larrivee adjourned the meeting at 7:36 p.m.